

MANUSCRIPTS

THE CAR

Cynthia Robertson

"They alone can pride themselves on their happiness, who are loved in return by those they love."

Bruce walked out of school with the rest of the students, his friend Tom beside him talking constantly. He didn't hear a word Tom was saying. His eyes and mind were on the long, silky blonde hair of the girl walking just ahead of him. It seemed to slide a little from side to side as she walked. "God, that's beautiful," he thought. As the group reached the corner bus stop, she turned slightly, as if she felt his eyes on her. He glanced away quickly, and a book slipped from under his arm and fell to the ground.

"Hey, Bruce, do you want to go to the movies tomorrow night or not?"

"Ugh? Oh—no, I can't. I'm broke. But my mom is on the night shift at the hospital again. Why don't you stop by after the movies and we'll finish off the beer. I've still got three cans left over from the party last week."

Just then, Tom gave Bruce a jab in the ribs: "Quick—look! Here comes Curt in that car of his again. Man, is that cool!" A bright, yellow Corvair came roaring out of the school parking lot, turned, and then slowed abruptly, as it cruised up to the curb and stopped. A dark, curly-haired face leaned out of the window and called through the crowd of girls standing near the bus stop. "Hey Barbara—want a ride home?" Bruce watched with painful envy, as the blonde climbed gracefully into the car and drove away. He felt a wave of anger start somewhere in the pit of his stomach and rise slowly. It lodged in his throat and he wanted to yell. Tom saw the tight look on his friend's face and said, "Man you better calm down. Your face is turning green."

When the bus finally arrived, the two boys filed on and Bruce slid in by the window and landed hard on the seat. He sat slumped in the corner, staring out. His whole mood had changed. "For Pete's sake," Tom said, "this is getting serious. If you like the girl so much, why the hell don't you call her up and ask her out?"

"Sure—that'd be just great. Then what? I suppose I'd take her to the movies on my bicycle or something. That'd make a big impression. Nope—I've decided there is only one answer. I've got to get myself a car! Somehow—I'm going to do it." He said it more to himself than to Tom.

"Now you're really dreaming. You don't have any money—how are you ever going to buy a car? Besides, don't you think you're rushing things a little? The girl doesn't even know you're alive." But Bruce didn't hear Tom's last remark. He was picturing himself behind the wheel of a bright, red car, with Barbara sitting by his side, smiling that gorgeous smile of hers—her beautiful blonde hair blowing in the wind.

Bruce got off at his regular stop, but he didn't go straight home that afternoon. Instead, he walked past his grey frame house, with its slightly sagging front porch, and kept walking until he reached the gas station on the corner. He had been coming there for years to use the coke machine and then hang around watching Bob, the owner, work. The place was dirty and greasy and cold, but Bruce never noticed. He like the sound of engines starting up and the soft "bing" of the bell which rang everytime a car drove past the pump. He was standing next to the cash register when Bob came in. He felt awkward and nervous when Bob looked at him, but he was determined. "Bob," he said, bravely. "I'm looking for a job and I thought maybe you could use someone to come in after school and help." Bob paused for a minute and wiped a greasy hand across his forehead.

"Come to think of it, I could use another two hands around here. I just lost a guy last week. I can't pay you more than \$1.50 an hour, though, and we stay open till 10:00. What time could you get here in the afternoons?" Bruce's face lit up.

"I can be here by 3:15 and I don't mind long hours—the longer the better. I can pump gas and don't worry about my adding—I get A's in Math and I learn fast too." All this was said in one breath. Bob couldn't keep from laughing. "Hey, wait a minute. You'll burn yourself out before you even start. Say, how old are you, Bruce?"

"Seventeen. I've got my license—I got it last year before Dad died." Bob leaned on the counter and shook his head.

"Boy, it seems like just last year you were coming in here hunting bottle caps. Well, O. K., son, you're on. I'll see you after school tomorrow."

That was at the end of September. From that time on Bruce's life changed. He was so busy he could hardly keep track of the days. He didn't go out for football. He didn't even have time to go to any of the

games. He hated that part, especially since Barbara was a cheerleader. She looked terrific in her uniform and when she swished past his desk in that short skirt he closed his eyes and imagined how she would have rushed up to him after a big game. He would have just made a winning touch-down and she would throw her arms around his neck and cry something into his ear like, "You're wonderful." Some nights when he got home at 10:30 he was too tired to study, and on other nights he stayed up late, then fell asleep in class the next day.

He never missed school. School was where Barbara was, just a glimpse of her was like a refueling for him—it charged him up through the rest of the day. She was in the same English class and once in awhile she'd say, "Hi, Bruce." That was all he needed to send him into new and more exciting dreams of how it would be when he got his car.

By the middle of October, fatigue and daydreams had begun to show in his schoolwork. He found it harder and harder to pay attention, especially in English class. One day he was called on unexpectedly when he had been drawing a sketch of Barbara's profile instead of listening. Mrs. Pruitt asked to see him after class. She questioned him with great worried eyes. What had been the matter lately? Was there trouble at home since his father died? She referred to his last two English papers which lay on her desk with bright red "C's" blinking on the top of each. He had never gotten anything lower than a "B" before. The whole thing worried him—not because of the grade, but because things had been going so well. He stammered some, and said that everything was all right, he'd do better next time. He was afraid Mrs. Pruitt might call his Mother to complain. He couldn't have that—not now. He had just found the perfect car that past weekend. It was blue, rather than red, but the tires were good. The man at the lot had let him test-drive it. Once around the block and he knew it was just what he wanted—and only \$300.00. If Mrs. Pruitt called his Mother it might ruin everything. He had been avoiding her concerned looks for days. A call like that might be just enough to have her come down hard on him and make him quit work. Bruce reassured his teacher a second time, then hurried outside the building where he could breathe easily again.

He already had almost half enough money by the end of October. He kept it hidden in a sock, inside one of his old boots in the bedroom closet. Every payday he cashed the check immediately, then that night he took all the money out and counted it carefully before adding the new cash to it.

Bruce became increasingly nervous and restless as he came closer to reaching his goal. He had begun to make elaborate plans of how he would approach Barbara once his car had become a reality. He decided to invite her to the Sock Hop at school at the end of November—that would give him time to drive the car awhile and get used to it. Again and again, he practiced what he would say to her—how he would start. At first he planned to call her on the phone. He even dialed her number a few times in hopes she would answer. Each time, he hung up immediately, then sat frozen by the phone, greatly agitated by the thrill of his own nerve. Later he decided that calling Barbara was out—too cold and impersonal. Instead, he would stop her after English class or when she was walking to her locker.

The first Monday in December was one of the coldest that Fall. Bruce would remember it always. He was up before the alarm that morning, wide awake and eager to make the day pass quickly. He was so excited that he felt giddy all day and found it difficult to sit still in class. When school was finally over Bruce even ran the two blocks from the bus stop to the service station. Bob always gave him his paycheck early on Mondays, then let him run across to the bank and cash it before getting to work. This day Bob noticed Bruce was happier than he had even seen him. "Judging by the grin on your face, this must be the big weekend," he said. "Are you sure this adds up to enough?"

"Yep—three hundred and fifty dollars," Bruce said, proudly. "I had the salesman write up the sale a long time ago, so I'd be sure to have the right amount. He even put a 'sold' sign on the car last week and didn't charge me anything extra to hold it."

"Well, you deserve it. I've never seen a kid work harder. Does this mean I should start looking for a new boy?"

"Oh, no—I still want to work for you. But I think I'd like to cut down on the number of hours if I can. You know, so I can study more. Mom's afraid I won't get a scholarship if I keep getting 'C's.'" She wants me to go to college."

"That makes good sense. Why don't you wait until Friday to talk about hours. I'm sure we can work something out." Bob really liked the boy. He added, "We might even talk about a little raise by then."

"Hey, Bob, thanks! That's great!" and with that, Bruce was so happy his feet barely touched the ground all evening.

He was home by 10:15 and didn't stop by the kitchen to raid the refrigerator. Instead he went straight up the stairs to his room. When he

opened the closet door, he noticed that something was different. There were no dirty clothes or piles of books and shoes strewn around. Everything looked clean and bare. There were a couple of pairs of Keds lined up neatly and a small stack of books, but no old boots. His heart stopped. The boots were gone! After the initial shock, he began to search the closet frantically, pulling everything off the shelves and knocking things aside. It was no use—the boots were gone!

"Mo—ther! Mother!" he yelled at the top of his voice. His Mother came hurrying into the room, startled by the urgency in his voice. He whirled around at her with clenched fists. "Where are my boots!" he demanded.

"You mean those old cowboy boots? I gave them to Goodwill—they were way too small for you. I cleaned out your whole closet today. . ."

"You didn't—you couldn't have! They had my money in them—almost \$300.00!" He was shouting at her. "You had no right to clean my closet! You had no right!" She looked at him helplessly with wide, bewildered eyes.

"Oh, Bruce—I'm sorry. I had no idea—I had no idea you had any money here. Maybe we can get it back. The truck just came this afternoon. Maybe if I call first thing in the morning. . ."

"But my car. I'm supposed to pay for my car tomorrow morning." Bruce was overcome by despair. He slumped down on the end of the bed.

"Please forgive me, Bruce," his Mother pleaded. "I thought you were putting your money in the bank. I never dreamed you'd keep that much money here in the house."

"Just leave me alone," he said, quietly. "Please-get out and leave me alone." She backed out of the room and closed the door.

Bruce began to cry. Softly at first—restrained, the way he had cried a year ago. Then harder. All the grief he had been holding deep inside came rushing out and he sobbed for the first time in his life. He cried for the money—the loss—but more than that, he cried for all the losses he had suffered and the greatest loss of all—his Father. There was anger mixed with sorrow then. He wanted to curse his Father leaving him alone and helpless and in need. He cried until there were no tears left and he fell asleep, exhausted.

When Bruce woke up the next morning, his body felt tired and heavy. He dragged himself out of bed with a sense of dread. His Mother

was sitting in the kitchen with her hands folded in her lap. He knew she had been there all night.

"I'm going down to the Goodwill store. I want to be there when it opens," he said.

She looked up weakly and said, "Bruce, you know I have some savings. If you don't find the money, I have enough to give you."

He shook his head. He knew there had been barely enough to pay the funeral bills and that was why they'd had to sell the family car.

"No thanks—I don't want it." His Mother looked so sad and beaten he could hardly stand it. "But—thanks anyway, Mom."

He was gone for more than an hour and when the screen door banged behind him, his Mother knew immediately he had been unsuccessful. "What happened?" she said.

"I found the boots all right—but the money was gone," he said flatly. "The guy down there asked all around the place if someone had found it, but no one would admit to it. That's what kills me—one of those people has my money and was looking right at me, but wouldn't admit it."

"Well, at least let me give you half of it. You can earn the rest in a few weeks. Maybe the car will still be there," she said.

"No! Never mind. I don't even care about the damn car anymore. Look—let's just forget it. It was all just a dream anyway. It wasn't your fault. I should have put it in the bank in the first place. I was just greedy, I guess. I just wanted to see it and count it and keep it near all the time. The whole thing was crazy."

Bruce didn't go to school that day. He lay on the sofa feeling numb. He tried to watch TV, but turned it off—he couldn't stand to watch the game shows with people jumping up and down, squealing over the money they had won for doing nothing.

After dinner the phone rang. He wasn't even going to answer it. He was afraid it would be Tom or one of the other guys and he wasn't ready to start answering a lot of questions. But his Mother answered and called him. There was no way out. He picked up the phone, reluctantly and said, "Hello?"

"Bruce, this is Barbara—Barbara Baker, from you English class." He was so stunned that there was a long pause before he could find his voice. "Oh—yeh—Hi."

"I'm calling you because—well, you see, I belong to this club called Sub-debs and we're having a party next weekend and, well, I was wondering if you would like to go with me."

He managed to answer somehow, "I'd like that—I mean—I'd like to—a lot."

"Good," she said. "I'll tell you more about it at school tomorrow."

"O.K. Say, Barbara, I hope you don't mind if I ask, but I thought you were dating Curt."

"Oh, that—that's all over. All he ever talked about was that car of his. Frankly, I got tired of playing second-fiddle to a silly old car."

AN OLDY MOLDY

Karen Greene

The old woman wrinkled her brow as she gazed at the overflowing fruit bin. Deep lines resembling the muddy river's tributaries crisscrossed her face and added many years to the already grey visage. The lower jaw moved up and down in a spastic biting motion. This displayed an extreme overbite. There was no telling what would happen if she did bite into one of the red beauties before her in the bin.

She raised a bonelike hand to her hair, making an attempt to beautify herself before asking the clerk, "Excuse me, young man, is the sign correct?"

The young blond clerk merely gazed at her batting eyelashes for several seconds. He couldn't help but notice her crooked smile which displayed two rows of crooked white teeth that resembled a white picket fence that had missed several spring paintings.

Standing away from the black shawled figure, the boy answered, "Yes, Ma'am. That's what the sign says. One pound will cost you fifty-nine cents." He turned away.